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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that there has been no single, unidimensional, totally agreed-on shift in educational beliefs in Alberta and British Columbia between 1984 and 1990. Rather, several ideologies, research findings, and powerful political voices seem to have coalesced toward the end of the 1980s. The shift in ideas that resulted has been actively supported, lobbied for, and influenced by early childhood groups in both provinces. Both provinces have recently: (1) legislated for school change; (2) claimed that change in early childhood education and primary education leads to flexibility and a more developmentally based framework for children; (3) taken pains to provide for steady, smooth development between stages of learning and between learning outcomes and activities; (4) emphasized the importance of not using solely decontextualized forms of assessment and viewing assessment and evaluation as essentially supporting the child's learning. Both provinces have emphasized: (1) the importance of close linkage between home and school; (2) the dangers inherent in inadequate provision of an effective basis for early childhood education; (3) the greater attention now to be given to linguistic diversity and immigrant culture; (4) arts and humanities in the curriculum; (5) integration of learning experiences and differentiated access to the curriculum for the younger child; and (6) the social nature of learning. (RH)

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CHANGING IDEOLOGIES AND PROVISION IN WESTERN CANADIAN PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Biographical note

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Summary

This paper sets out impressions of the changes occurring in educational policy and provision in primary and early childhood education (approximately ages 3 to 9) in Alberta and British Columbia. It results from numerous visits to school boards, schools and kindergartens, discussions with board and ministry officers in particular and from the analysis of the major policy documents relating to the Sullivan Commission (British Columbia, 1988) and the School Act, Bill 27 (Alberta, 1988). It suggests that a more flexible, non-graded, developmentally based approach is appearing in both provinces and that both appear to be moving away from a rigidly age and grade, test-dominated curriculum of recent years. Current policy is better to articulate the levels of early educational provision, pre-school and primary including that available for native peoples, but still largely to (centrally) define appropriate curricula and activities for young children. The implications for the initial training and especially the in-service education of primary teachers are considerable.

Changing ideologies and provision in Western Canadian primary education[1]

Introduction

Whilst Britain moves towards the full implementation of a national curriculum, arguably derived from an essentially grammar school curriculum of 1904, it is instructive to note a movement in the opposite direction in Western Canada. Whilst Britain builds an assessment system reminiscent of those proposed by Black Paper writers (Cox & Boyson, 1977), Alberta and British Columbia are proposing ways of ameliorating the rigid perspectives implied by certain forms and 'grading' of assessment.

This paper is based on visits, observations and discussions in the two Western provinces over the last six years, together with documentation, especially that flowing from the Sullivan Commission (Sullivan 1988) and that supporting the School Act (Alberta, 1988).

Background

British Columbia

Between Spring 1987 and Summer 1988, British Columbia's Royal Commission on Education (under the direction of the late Barry Sullivan QC) carried out an extensive study of the school system. The motivation for such an enquiry seems to have been already extant by the mid-1980s. The influx of immigrants to Western Canada, the changing ethnic composition of the population, changes in the structure of the economy (from a resource based to mixed economy, with increasing reliance on the information and service sectors) the altering composition of the family the

developing roles of women: all these led to calls for flexibility, creativity and life-long learning approaches which could take account of the whole populace, not merely a sector of it.

The Commission documented social and economic changes over some twenty years and noted that the school system seemed to serve certain groups very well (those going on to post-secondary education at universities or colleges). But it also noted the 'disturbingly high' drop-out rate for non-academic students in school and the urgent need to create alternative routes and programmes of good quality.

"To some extent, the seeds of the dropout problem may be sown in the elementary years, when students are establishing their individual and cultural identities, and critically important attitudes and skills are being developed". (Min of Ed, 1990, p2). In particular the Commission noted that self-esteem was important and should be nurtured throughout all the years of schooling. It summarised the purposes of schooling as cultivation of the mind, preparation of vocational life, moral and civic development, individual development and self worth: (Sullivan 1988, pp22, 23) and noted that, 'at present curriculum development and implementation processes are highly centralised through Ministry of Education programs (but that) implementation activities organised by the Ministry are relatively limited and do not appear to significantly affect what happens in classrooms' (op cit pp27-28). It identified two particular conceptual frameworks for curriculum analysis: (1) Stages of the curriculum - Early, Middle and Late; and (2) Perspectives; Intended, Implemented and Attained.

The Sullivan Commission made eighty-three recommendations, fifteen of these directly concerning the school curriculum. (Two of which are crucially important for

early childhood and primary education; namely that developmental criteria should be over-riding in the educational placement of children entering school, that legislation be enacted to establish ungraded primary divisions in school.) Others included 'dual entry' provision during the first year of schooling, where previously only one time of admission, at the beginning of Fall, had been allowed; a greater responsiveness to local and what might be termed 'small-scale' curriculum change; increased emphasis on a wide common curriculum years 1 to 10 (age 6 to 16 years); that after year 10 there should be an official certificate of entitlement to an additional two years of secondary education; that there should be access to mentors and advisers throughout all years; and that it was vital to establish a major drive to 'incorporate the concept of lifelong learning'.

Moreover, the Commission examined the role and status of teachers and recommended a concerted effort to rate the status of teaching as a career, requiring that all teachers complete a minimum five years of teacher education, including an approved undergraduate degree, emphasising the role of continual professional development (especially in rural areas of the province).

The Commission also recommended far-reaching funding changes, (especially that of requiring the Provincial government to move to a more-stable, long term block-funding formula), but wished to see broadly the same provincial/local balance in funding. Gender equity and the monitoring of curriculum materials to eliminate gender-bias also formed an integral part of the overall recommendations.

The Provincial government accepted and adopted the vast majority of the recommendations with commendable speed. By September 1989 part one of a plan to implement the policy directions was in place. (Enabling Learners,Working Plan 1)

based on a ten year time-scale and clearly rooted in the notion of consultation and partnership with parents, teachers and other interested groups.

Of particular concern here is the mechanisms, responses, and draft and final programmes for primary education. In June 1989 a draft programme document was distributed throughout the province for comment. It had been prepared by a team of experienced teachers and consultants appointed specifically for the task: Workshops and seminars with teachers and parents were also held throughout the province. A vast number of responses resulted and in June 1990 the (augmented) Primary Program Team revised the document and replaced it with two documents. The Primary Program: Foundation Document and The Primary Program Resource Document.

These two documents are the new foundation for the next decade or so. Whilst discussed in the relative isolation of early childhood education changes later in the paper, in reality they must be studied and embedded in the whole context of education policy and curricular change in British Columbia. A similar process of 'grounded' change, discussion and revision is going on at other stages - intermediate and upper secondary (graduation) - and expansion of the university college system is also planned. The Ministry of Education document Year 2000: A Framework for Learning (1990) is important in this respect, since it clearly espouses a policy based in part on the views of educators, trustees of school boards and parents. It reflects the 'mandate', recommended by the Sullivan Commission and the School Act of 1989. It attempts to 'balance' the goals of education, the mission of the school system (needs of society, sustainable economy) and the characteristics of the educated citizen (critical, independent, possessed of a positive self-image) in an intelligible outline of

linked roles and responsibilities. Broad intentions for each level are offered, together with an overview of programmes and their organisation. There is no lack of phrases familiar to readers of the British National Curriculum Council documents. There is an emphasis on a 'more outcomes focused system' and on 'high expectations' and on 'standards'. But there is also considerable emphasis on process and individual need.

Alberta

There have been no recent Royal Commissions concerned with education in Alberta. But a new School Act came into being in December, 1988 and policy is clearly changing in several domains - from that of the gradual expansion of the 'open-learning' systems of Athabasca University, through the clearer modularisation of foundation of part-degree programmes in the community colleges (such as at Grant McEwan, Red Deer or Medicine Hat, where it is possible to read for the first two years of a degree course which can then be completed at a university), to the more secure legal footing, funding and articulation of early childhood services.

Among these changes none touches so completely on large numbers of the population as does the last. In the 1960s and early 1970s the Department of Education did not include pre-school (Early Childhood Services or Kindergarten) for children, though numerous private operators and some school boards provided a locally-funded early childhood, pre-school education, usually for ages 4 to 6 years. But from 1973, the Early Childhood Services "began to provide publicly financed pre-school education administered by school boards, some private schools and many incorporated non-profit societies....." (Alberta Education, 1988 (a) p6) Early Childhood Services and Elementary Education were, however, set up as separate departments within the

provincial government. The Commission of Inquiry (1978) whilst commending certain clear overarching principles (eg, efficacy of play, integration of pre-primary and primary programmes) as the bases of early childhood provision, did not herald the actual merging of Early Childhood Services with Elementary Education throughout Alberta. Such a merger had to wait almost nine years, to the spring of 1987, despite gathering concern and considerable pressure from key organisations and persons. Yet, undoubtedly, the desirability of articulating voluntary early childhood programmes with grade school (often termed 'education programme continuity') has its roots back in the action of educators in the early 1970s. The Alberta Teachers' Association and its associated specialist councils, particularly the Early Childhood Council, played an important part. It is also important to note that, in the late 1960s there existed four times as much private ECS provision as that funded by school boards. By 1991, however, some 90% of ECS programmes were offered by school boards. During the 1970s and 1980s, ECS teachers were trained specifically as such [i.e. they received an ECS diploma, or majored in early childhood education (ECE) in their degree]. Since 1986, however, the province has permitted anyone trained as a teacher to teach ECS, though it encourages the addition of specialist courses and diplomas in the field. The preponderance of private ECS provision in the late 1960s and early 1970s was seen by some advisers and consultants as a possible advantage in that, as one expressed it, "the philosophy was unhampered by too much school board pressure and bureaucracy". Several saw dangers in the incorporation of ECS, in that the preoccupations of the early grades of elementary schools might press down on the ideas and provisions of the kindergarten. "Being ready for grade one can press down upon ECS in the same way that the secondary high school curriculum can dominate the primary structure;" and "I believe that children do learn by experience in the classic child-centred mode; I feel unhappy with the still-too-rigid structure of primary

programmes. I think children are often pigeon-holed and lock-stepped too much and, despite the official documents on articulation, there can be a real separation in ideologies and beliefs".

Notwithstanding such fears (and I have no way of knowing how representative they are), certain features and differences do strike the observer. For instance, with the exception of known circumstances in Red Deer, there seems to be very little vertical grouping in the elementary schools of the province, despite permissive legislation. Yet it is a common enough feature of kindergarten (ECS) provision, which throughout the province espouses very clear principles of integration and child development as the bedrock of its instructional strategies. Officially, the policy for ECS and Grade School should certainly be flexible enough, since, "Instructional staff, principals, other program administrators, parents and community resources persons will ensure that children move from one stage to their education program to another in accordance with individual needs, individual abilities and appropriateness of learning environments" (Alberta Education, 1988 (a) p13).

The perceived lack of vertical grouping in grade school was thought to be the result of all manner of complex features; one of these could be that school board insurances were said to be based on homogeneous age -groupings such that premiums might militate against changes in educational organisation. However, a senior staff member of the Alberta Education Department assured me that there was no official policy that precluded such forms of alternative grouping, simply inertia or lack of understanding on the part of certain school boards and their senior administrators. The latter, it should be pointed out, are almost exclusively without active ECS or lower grade school experience.

Despite the reported misgivings, it is apparent that incorporation of four and five year olds into broadly defined educational programmes prior to the official age of starting grade school has been whole-hearted and significant. By 1988 97% of Albertan five-years olds were in ECS (Alberta Education (a) 1988, p15). By 1989 some 140 centres for ECS programmes existed throughout the province. The new School Act (1988) attempted to set out a framework for the entire educational provision within the province. It was the result of some four years of debate, submission and discussion documents. Like the British Columbian policy proposals, parental partnership and local autonomy were the 'leit-motif' of the discussion documents; and, throughout the drafting and passage of the Act, attention was paid to the Albertan tradition of 'one public system with two dimensions', ie the public, provincial, non-denominational dimension and the separate religious dimension, (servicing, in most cases, though not all, Catholic children). Additionally, French minority parents (who qualify under Alberta's Charter) have the right to have their children educated in French.

Under section 14 of the 1988 Act ECS programmes may be provided by school boards or persons (with the approval of the Minister). But school boards are permitted to charge the parents minimal fees in respect of pre-statutory school age children (prior to age 6 years), as they are for other levels of education.

The articulation policy (ECS through to grade 6, or 12 years) is discretionary until August 1993; the period between 1988 and 1993 being the time allowed for information-seeking preparation of guide lines and in-service of teachers. before its espousal becomes mandatory. The 1988 policy document emphasises that articulation is not a programme, it is an attitude of mind based on principles of child development, individualization, flexibility and continuity. The policy document itself builds upon

and constantly refers to other major documents of Alberta Education particularly Early Childhood Services: Philosophy, Goals and Program Dimensions (1984); and this latter was itself clearly influenced by a major position paper on Human Development:The Early Years prepared for ECS Alberta by Dr W Schmidt (1984). Talking with key personnel in areas of ECS and Elementary Education leads one to summarise the present position as follows:-

The central documents are undoubtedly those of School Act Bill 27 (1988), Education Program Continuity (Alberta Education(1988 (a)) and Guide to Education, (ECS to grade 6) (1990). Both the last two refer frequently to child-focused, developmentally-based curricula. Values (philosophy), the desirable of continuity, partnership with parents, matching the needs and interests of children take precedence. Evaluation and assessment, whilst discussed in some detail, are as much about evaluation of whole programmes as about measuring 'desirable' individual achievements.

Notwithstanding the above, there is clearly a vociferous, often articulate 'back-to-the-basics' movement. [Brief conversation with Susan Lynch (Associate Director, ECS/Elementary Unit, Curriculum Design Branch, Alberta Education) suggests that this is nevertheless largely overidden by more 'progressive' elements within the public and the profession. For instance of the 3,500 responses to the draft document Elementary Language Learning ECS/Grade 6 (Alberta Education, 1990 (b) 85% + were positive and encouraging]. Politicians are apparently anxious to marry their preoccupations with 'standards' with the reality of a growing body of research which shows that (for instance) phonic approaches are not always best especially if used by themselves, or that developmentally based curricula may be more appropriate than centrally imposed models of desirable, norm-referenced, attainment.

Alberta, with a population of over two million, is widely spreading geographically and is "more decentralised than people think", (Lynch, 1990) Different areas have responded differently; and such responses reflect the collective attitudes of the local community and the specific superintendent's beliefs. (See, for instance, early comment about vertical grouping in Red Deer).

Other curriculum areas are to be developed. The policy of 'whole language/real books having been the first, it is intended that maths and science will be next. But there is the avowed intention to use consultation and 'people-in-the-field' as much as possible in order to avoid arid 'top-down' models of curriculum change. Curriculum consultants, superintendents and other administrative personnel spoken to seemed especially anxious to take the approval/cooperation of early childhood teachers with them. Whilst the 'continuity' and 'language' documents of the province certainly herald a change in attitude, there are inconsistencies in the overall philosophy which may need recognition or adjustment. It would seem that the scope of testing and evaluation (almost a separate 'industry' in Alberta) needs broadening to more nearly fit the child and to more appropriately incorporate criterion-referenced rather then norm-referenced approaches.

Discussion

From my viewpoint, as a frequent visitor to the two provinces during the last six years, and one who regularly, but opportunistically descended on various boards, schools, curriculum consultants and ministry officials, it is clear that there has been no single, unidimensional, totally agreed shift in educational beliefs. Rather, several ideologies, research findings and powerful political voices seem to have coalesced towards the

end of the 1980s. This concordance was described by one retiring consultant as "occurring after some ten-to-fifteen years of 'back to the basics' pressures." Be that as it may, this shift in ideas has certainly been actively supported, lobbied for and influenced by early childhood groups, both in Alberta and British Columbia. Since much of the change has been predicated on elementary and early childhood methodology, curricula and assessment, where the ideological component seems inextricably confused with theory and research, and wherein there are fecund residues of folk-lore on the teaching of basic skills, a certain skirmishing (local and provincial) has been inevitable. But it has clearly not been internecine warfare; rather, it has occurred in three broad, sometimes overlapping domains:-

1) Between senior administrative personnel (in school boards) and their early childhood/curriculum staff/ECE teachers in specific regions. This could be explained in terms of the lack of senior staff with appropriate early childhood experience. In both provinces the overwhelming majority of superintendents are men. In British Columbia there are 4 women superintendents and 74 men. (BC Min of Ed,1990). Most are recruited from backgrounds where knowledge has been shaped and framed by subject discipline learning and teaching (vide Bernstein, 1970); and, with rare exceptions, few are in-serviced regularly or sufficiently in respect of the needs and capacities of your children. [With Alberta now contributing some $81,000,000 from central provincial funds towards ECS in 1991-1992, and the grants being relatively similar per capita for grades 1 through to 12 (approx $2000+), one might expect school boards to devote substantial time to ECS/Elementary articulation, provision and in-service training.]

2) Between certain strong minority public groups (together with some journalists of provincial papers) and the early childhood and elementary teachers/consultants. This is particularly so in the case of the whole-language debate, in respect of spelling

and in respect of purported lower levels of achievement in certain grade tests over time. It is fuelled by comment from certain newspapers, sometimes nostalgically drawing upon images of high standards and severe (but knowledgeable) teachers who taught in one-room prairie schoolhouses. It borrows cross-culturally from the USA, often assuming that both countries are identical; it lampoons 'progressive' education, sometimes referring to their proponents as "Dewey-eyed". Even in more reputable magazines, the sarcasm is barely disguised.

"The ministries of education in all of our four (western) provinces continue to believe in the miraculous properties of progressive education, instituting policies (like British Columbia's latest 'Year 2000' scheme) that prolong the hopeful trek towards a Utopia first formulated in the 1920s.....Hirsch and others in the United States advocate a pragmatic halfway ground.....But so far in western Canada, such common sense remains an alien concept to most educational policy makers." (Dolphin, 1990) It should perhaps be noted that, between 1970 and 1986, private school enrolment, in the 540 private schools in those same four western provinces, increased by some 60%. Public school numbers declined by about 7% during the same period.

3) Between certain politicians and teacher unions

Here the disputes seem less focused around purely pedagogic matters and more confused with other issues (salaries, conditions of work, right of unions to be consulted). In BC the Sullivan Commission was the 'cornerstone' of what might be considered largely progressive policy development for Tony Brummett (BC Minister of Education 1986-1990); yet, as a minister who sometimes coupled schooling and its outcomes with those of the economy, as one who also characterised teachers as distinctly 'conservative' in their responses, he frequently fell foul of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation. (He was an ex-teacher himself). It is said that his

attempts to tie local funding to strict limits, by a form of 'capping' and local referendum, seriously undermined the chances of speedy changes in line with the reforms. Brummett said of the union on retirement, when asked about his attitude to liberal reform and proposed non-grading in the elementary schools, "There was always so much negativism coming from them". (Brummet, 1990)

In Alberta, where the Alberta Teachers' Association is perhaps a stronger and more unified force, its own Early Childhood Council has been effective in communicating with and convincing colleagues in other areas of education that the modest 'articulation' and curriculum reforms are not the result of concessions dragged from a reluctant government, but the result of working with them. Nevertheless there are clear governmental and within party divisions over educational methodology and reform; and certain Members of the Legislative Assembly, in particular, have spoken out against the policies of Dinning (current Minister of Education, 1991.)

British primary teachers, struggling with the effects of central curriculum guidelines for the first time in their professional lives, may not realise how important set provincial guidelines are and have been in the Canadian provinces. For instance, in Alberta and British Columbia I have heard no argument that the curriculum should be left solely to the school and local community to determine (and that was an argument sometimes heard in Britain in the 1960s). Rather the arguments have been couched in terms of social and curriculum theories, in the context of values, discussions and perceptions of criticality and independence. Typical have been concerns to retain, value and foster teaching in specific elements of diverse immigrant culture, anxiety about the relatively high drop-out rates in the western provinces, [This is in comparison with, for example, the Maritimes, where the dropout - with no work

available - may be artificially lowered.] perceptions of appropriate curriculum width and depth, methods of teaching literacy, the dangers of teaching to 'restricted', easily testable material, and so on. In some parts of Alberta there are also demands for the censorship of certain literature and an expressed anxiety concerning explicit depictions which do not accord with fundamentalist religious beliefs. But by and large these do not appear materially to have affected the shift in legislation and professional attitudes.

For the ECE groups (both ECS and lower elementary grades) the major battlefields have been those of too-defined a curriculum/basic programme pressing down on early childhood practices, and the large-scale disagreements over the methods of teaching reading. This latter has been polarised in terms of 'phonics versus whole language' approaches.

As stated at the outset, the prime intention of this paper has been to describe impressions gained and conversations recorded during some seventeen visits, teaching sessions in schools and conference lectures given between 1984 and 1990 in western Canada. Since my teaching and consultancy commitments have been to elementary education and early childhood services generally, that area (loosely described as early childhood education - but really encompassing educational provision from about 4 to 9 years) has been my prime source of information. In the middle of those visits and discussions the Sullivan Commission Sullivan (1988) reported in British Columbia and in Alberta the new School Act (Alberta, Minister of Ed)(1988) came onto the statute books. Both these focus attention on the whole range of educational provision, but both also pay specific attention to some fundamental changes in early childhood education. I note that before and after them the Early Childhood Council, of the

Alberta Teachers' Association, and the early childhood/primary groups associated with the British Columbia Teachers' Federation appear to have been particularly active, judging from teachers' convention themes and workshops. Curriculum consultants and key personnel in both provinces have convinced me that some of the principal educational changes and developments clustered around:- (1) the disjuncture between early childhood services and elementary grade school in Alberta; (2) a specific concern that ages 5 - 9 years of schooling in British Columbia should be more flexible, ungraded and more negotiable. Inevitably, perhaps, the discourse has used the teaching of the basics (in particular of oracy and literacy, but to some extent also numeracy and scientific awareness) as prime vehicles for starting arguments about content and process. For both groups developmental 'criteria' culled largely from the psychology of child development have been much to the fore (eg Elkind, 1989). Questions over the weaknesses of centrally imposed curricula and the need for local and cultural differentiation and match have also been part of this latter discussion. In British Columbia two words in particular have come to be used as shorthand for these presumed desirable states of affairs; these are 'non-graded' and 'integration' (BC English Teachers' Association, 1990).

Whilst no direct connection may be easily descried between the UK and these two provinces of Canada, and bearing in mind the dangers of selective comparisons (Phillips, 1989), it is interesting to note somewhat different emphases in the Canadian (provincial) legislation when compared with that most recently concerning England and Wales (ERA 1988). In both provinces philosophy is of prime importance. All outlines and suggestions are predicated on clear, and usually, fairly detailed value statements. 'Mission statements', goals, purposes and attributes thought desirable abound, even in very routine documents such as the BC Public and Independent

Schools Book (BC Min of Ed, 1990), a sample list of names and locations. In British Columbia, 'Year 2000' is the umbrella term used to describe the proposed policy changes in education. The summary states that the curriculum, from ages five to eighteen is to be 'learner focused'. It has four strands. Humanities, Sciences, Fine Arts and Practical Arts. A common curriculum is suggested, which includes elements of all four strands. Twenty percent of curriculum time is to be left for negotiation at school level. Differential access, or 'alternative pathways' to completion of the curriculum are planned. Gender equity is to be reinforced; encouragement is to be given to different cultures.

Assessment of the BC Curriculum is to be criterion-referenced and a variety of assessment methods to be used. (see diagram 1). In particular Learner profiles encompassing all four domains of assessment are to be used. The first four years of elementary school are to be non-graded. The new primary curriculum is to commence in Fall 1991. The three basic principles of the curriculum/assessment system are set out as:-

"(1) Learning requires the active participation of the learner

(2) People learn in a variety of ways and at different rates

(3) Learning is both an individual and a social process" (BC,1990,b P2)"

In Alberta the 1988 Act quickly led to the final articulation of early childhood services with elementary education. This continuity is firmly based on the principles of child development (Alberta Ed, 1988 (a)). Three areas in particular are singled out for emphasis and stressed as necessary; positive self-concept; language and thinking skills; parent involvement. From 1990 'Elementary' has been taken as subsuming 'ECS to Grade 6'. Although Early Childhood Services (ECS) is a voluntary programme throughout Alberta, it must now be "planned, implemented and evaluated on the basis

of the beliefs and principles outlined in ECS Philosophy, Goals and Program Dimensions" (Alberta Ed, 1990 (a) p15). The programmes of work themselves are interesting exemplars of advice sought from early childhood educators throughout the province. They are organised into 'clusters' of activities around developments in the following areas:- self-concept; health and physical; social, emotional, intellectual and creative. Within-school organisation of children (grouping - including vertical age grouping) is considered to be a 'local matter' and expressly assigned thus.

Evaluation and assessment are expected to be carried out at local level, with heavy emphasis on diagnostic testing and upon the availability of tests approved by the Student Evaluation Branch. Additionally, a Provincial Achievement Testing Program is conducted at Grades 3, 6 and 9 for the purpose of providing comparators of local and provincial achievement levels. It is "not intended to provide information for student placement or promotion" in language arts, social studies, maths and science: (Alberta Ed 1990 (b) p23). The Program of Studies' is expected to be adhered to but, "in communicating student progress to parents, students, teachers and others, the methods of recording and reporting are a local matter" (ibid).

Impressions of Similarities and differences.

Whilst the focus of this paper has been on early childhood education in two Western Canadian provinces, it is important to be aware that these are two autonomous provinces of enormous size and difference, with different patterns of immigration, somewhat different traditions in political and religious belief and which have approached their educational changes differently. Both have scattered populations of between 2 and 3 million; and, for the last three or four decades, both have been concerned about appropriate educational provision for their aboriginal or 'First

Nation' peoples. In both provinces there have been long traditions of integration between vocational training and education, unlike the traditional tendency to separate them, that has existed in Britain. In both provinces, constitutionally, political control has been heavily located and jealously guarded there, rather than centrally in Ottawa, and school has been "subject to more democratic control and hence concerned more with transmitting a common culture and equipping its pupils as citizens rather than preparing them for a pre-determined position in the division of labour" (Ashton & Lowe, 1991, p210).

British Columbia's position on the Pacific Rim, has become highly significant and has of recent years ensured considerable immigration.

As a province it has tended to be always conscious of its massive port outlets, its shipping and logging trade. It's nature is markedly cosmopolitan and fluid - yet built on a tradition of long European trade and settlement. By contrast, Alberta, like Saskatchewan, has been oriented largely to its southern provinces, its grain and cattle production, its farming communities. Both these compressed caricatures do great injustice to the complexity of the two provinces, but they indicate just a little of the 'roots' of their settlement and dominant concerns; they imply, for me, too, a somewhat different set of assumptions behind their education reforms.

To continue the compression, this might help to explain why Alberta's changes appear incremental, somewhat 'stolid', aimed at slowly convincing the tight-knit communities and groups, even at times mechanistic and ordered. It might explain why experiments (within the law - such as vertical grouping) - are rare. Yet Alberta is as rich in its own cultural and language diversity as is British Columbia. The Alberta School Act,

1988, recognises that diversity and provides for education in French and for some aboriginal language teaching as well as mother tongue teaching in Ukrainian, German, Chinese, Italian and Hebrew. Both provinces recognise the right of parents to opt for home education, providing they can demonstrate its efficacy. Both are deeply concerned with the education of their native Indian population.

To me, however, the British Columbian Sullivan Commission, 1988, reads like a 'root and branch' revision of education. The speed of consultation and change has been impressive; the documentation available has been considerable; the impact on schools immediate. My perceptions are of a major change in policy and direction in British Columbia, rather as a great liner changing course. Whereas in Alberta, the impression gained is of long considered, firm and careful adjustments to a policy that has evolved over the last decade.

Final summary and conclusions

This paper is not the result of survey data; it does not process large numbers of quantifiable responses to educational change. It is a qualitative assessment. Whilst I was careful to document conversations and to ask broadly similar questions of consultants and officials, much of the information presented is in the form of opinions and impressions and, at best, the study is based on a broad ethnographic approach coupled with the reading of official documents and newspaper comment. Whilst talking with teachers, teaching in the schools, reading the documentation, I have inevitably interpreted material and experiences in ways which I understand.

Certain things are clear, however:-

(1) Both provinces have recently legislated for school change.

(2) In early childhood education/ primary education, that change is officially claimed to lead to flexibility and a more developmentally based framework for your children. (BC Min of Ed, 1990 (d) - Alberta Ed, (1990) (b) p2).

(3) In all major documents, both provinces emphasise the important of close school/home linkage.

(4) Both are at pains to emphasise the dangers, inherent in an inadequate provision of an effective early childhood basis.

(5) Both emphasise the greater attention now to be given to linguistic diversity/immigrant culture.

(6) Both pay considerable attention to arts/humanities in their curriculum suggestions.

(7) Both emphasise the importance of not using solely 'decontextualised' forms of assessment (see diagram 1) and see assessment and evaluation as essentially supporting the child's learning.

(8) Both emphasise integration of learning experiences and differentiated access to the curriculum for the younger child, rather than 'subject' bases.

(9) Both emphasise the social nature of learning.

(10) Both are at pains to provide for steady, smooth development between stages of learning (articulation) and between learning outcomes and learning activities.

My own personal conclusions are that both provinces have been through a long period of 'back-to-the-basics' approaches and are now emerging to a clearly stated compromise whereby the structure and content of knowledge can more clearly seen to be critically mediated through process. The reliance on teaching to testable outcomes has been explored and found wanting. As one consultant (BC) said:

"Testing has narrowed the teachers' visions and harnessed the children unnecessarily."

But I do not see the changes in the education of young children as a mere return to some idealised 'liberal' position of the 1960s, whereby the map of experience is drawn up after the event. In both cases the educational infra-structures have been alive with serious professional debate. Consultation appears to have been lengthy and genuine. The effects of the changes in early childhood educational provision appear to be 'rippling' through the later stages of education, where there is more consultation and change to come; and they should not be thought to be divorced from them. In British Columbia the schedule of changes set out in Working Plan #3 read like a battle plan (BC, Min of Ed, 1990 (c)) and one is well aware that, to have the proposed changes in place by 2000 will require much effort. On the horizon are revised systems of teacher training and in-service, greater attention to development of local materials for those areas of negotiated curricula, gender equity, and so on. In Alberta the horizons are perhaps a little more limited, but the plans for curriculum reform clear and inexorable. Perhaps the whole picture is best summed up by a comment from a trustee of a school board in Northern Alberta. "We are not just about getting our kids somewhere, we are about the whole quality of our culture." (Fort McMurray, 1989).

(1) Note

Throughout the paper I have used 'primary education' as a generic term for the first stage of compulsory education. Likewise I have used 'early childhood education' as an umbrella term for the non-compulsory kindergarten or pre-school provision prior to primary school. It should be noted that, in British Columbia, primary school starts in the year the child attains the age of five and may be preceded by voluntary half-day

provision of kindergarten programmes, usually from age three. In Alberta elementary or grade school starts at six years and may be preceded by early childhood services (ECS) from about age three, again on a voluntary basis. Pre-school provision is usually for half-day attendance.

DIAGRAM 1 (Province of BC., 1990h)

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